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SUBJECT: NIGER: In News from Abroad GON President Tandja Rules Out Third Term, Invites Mouvement des Nigériens Pour La Justice (MNJ) to Lay Down Arms

REF: A) Niamey 1237 (NOTAL) B) Niamey 1220 and previous

¶1. (U) Summary. Local newspapers have reported and are commenting on excerpts of Government of Niger (GON) President Mamadou Tandja's October 2 interview with "Le Monde". In that interview Tandja rules out running for a third term and invites combatants in northern Niger to lay down their arms. He also addressed a question of whether the U.S. is planning to build a military base in Niger and emphasized Niger's need to take advantage of the recent hike in the price of uranium. Some local commentary noted that a foreign journal abroad was granted the interview, as opposed to granting equal opportunity to local media in Niger. End summary.

¶2. (U) The October 9 publications of several local newspapers "Le Canard Dechainé", "L'Enqueteur", "L'Evenement" and "La Griffé" reported on GON President Tandja's October 2 interview with "Le Monde".

¶3. (U) In response to reporters' questions about the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ), Tandja did not recognize the MNJ as a legitimate political group. He is quoted as saying the combatants are no more than "drug traffickers seeking to dress themselves up as noble rebels." Tandja reiterated the GON will not negotiate with drug traffickers and bandits, but cracked open a door for possible negotiation by stating that "peace will be reached eventually" and that his government is "willing to hold discussions with no limitations on subject matter, but only if the combatants lay down their arms."

¶4. (U) On the issue of whether he plans to run for a third term of office (ref A), Tandja ruled out that possibility. He added he is democratic and will leave office at the end of his mandate, that he can serve his nation in other ways.

¶5. (SBU) When asked whether the U.S. is planning to install a military base in Niger as part of the plan to fight against terrorists, Tandja responded that the GON had not been asked about one. He further stated "the U.S. has no need for one, as the Americans can detect a ping pong ball in the Sahara Desert through the use of satellites, far better than any armed person." He added "there are no Islamic extremists in northern Niger, no one has seen or heard anything."

¶6. (U) Briefly touching on the subject of Niger's uranium deposits, Tandja stated that Niger, as the world's third largest exporter, must take advantage of the current rise in market prices to maximize its profits. He put Areva (the French firm that holds uranium concessions) on notice that they must offer better remuneration to

Niger, that he's prepared to take the matter to the politicians in Paris, if necessary. He added that Niger will sell its share of the uranium produced on the open market.

17. (SBU) While excerpts of President Tandja's October 2 interview were covered, some media commentary lodged criticism about the interview being conducted with a journal abroad, instead of with local media in Niger. At the same time, local journalists continue to face possible arrest, the most recent case that of Director of Publication for "Info de l'Air", Ibrahim Manzo, arrested last night at the Niamey airport while waiting to board a flight to Paris. He allegedly was asked whether he was the Radio France International (RFI) correspondent. Embassy learned that Manzo was transferred earlier today (10/10) to the National Police, but no public information has been released on the reason for the arrest. The President of the Association of Niger Editors (ANEPI) condemned the arrest and called for national and international media and civil society to react firmly against the arrest.

18. (U) There have been press reports that a French journalist/documentary filmmaker, Francois Bergeron, was expelled from Niger on October 5. The Nigerien authorities had reportedly arrested him in Agadez on suspicion of having ties with the MNJ. The government prohibits foreign journalists from traveling to the north.

19. (SBU) Comment. In Ambassador's recent discussions with GON Cabinet members (two as recently as this week) about journalists' arrests and reporting restrictions, the consistent response has been that the journalists arrested haven't been arrested because of their profession or affiliation with a particular media organ, but rather because of their collaboration with individuals causing insecurity in the North. They claim that restrictions are necessary because some journalists are sympathizers with the MNJ and, consequently, present biased reporting potentially demoralizing to military

officers and their families. They also state that the GON sometimes does not counter false reports because they don't want to alienate the general population against a particular ethnic group. End comment.

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